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Playing With a Loaded Gun: Spice and Designer Drugs Detrimental to Health

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By Vice Adm. Matthew L. Nathan, U.S. Navy surgeon general and chief, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery



As many of you may have read in media reports nationwide last week, the Navy is aggressively pursuing steps in educating and preventing the use of synthetic drugs like “Spice,” a synthetic form of marijuana which is falsely advertised as “legal pot.” I want to make it clear though that Spice is not a problem solely for the military; it is a problem for everyone. The military represents a microcosm of a much larger population and in many ways strives to be

a reflection of the society it serves, so we share many of the same health and safety issues as the general population. We have chosen to focus our communication and legal efforts on this specific issue for two simple reasons—these drugs endanger the health and wellbeing of our people and they affect military readiness.

The chemicals found in these drugs are not regulated by the FDA and no two batches are alike as manufacturers continually change the compound makeup in order to allude drug testing. Most packaging clearly reads, “Not for human consumption,” and that is for good reason. Military and civilian health professionals continue to learn more about the negative health effects of Spice use and the data is alarming. The compounds used to make Spice can be up to 200 times more potent than the THC in traditional marijuana. These extremely potent chemicals bind themselves more permanently to a person's receptors. As such, Spice has been reported to cause elevated blood pressure, tremor, seizures, vomiting, abdominal pain and more. Several episodes of heart damage have been reported with Spice use, as well as several reports of persistent psychotic symptoms, hallucinations and paranoid behavior lasting several days. There have also been civilian deaths and reported suicides associated with the use of Spice. I cannot over-emphasize my concern on this matter from a health perspective as my medical providers have witnessed and treated many of these reported symptoms at military treatment facilities.

In addition to the health concerns, there are readiness issues involved and use of these products by our people will not be tolerated as personnel using them impact not only themselves but their shipmates. These drugs are currently included under the Navy's zero tolerance policy for drug abuse. Use of these substances by military personnel is prohibited and punishable under the UCMJ and commanding officers do not need a positive urinalysis

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to begin adverse administrative action.

Sadly, in recent months we have been forced to separate numerous Sailors and Marines due to Spice use and our hope is to end this spike as soon as possible. These drugs are hazardous and we learn more about their damaging effects each day.

Taking Spice is comparable to playing Russian roulette with your both your mental and physical health, as well as your career. If you wouldn't play it with a gun, why would you play it with a drug? I urge all of our Sailors and Marines to aggressively monitor both themselves and their friends. It is not good enough to simply police our own actions with regards to Spice and other designer drugs. Every Sailor and Marine must look out for their fellow service members to prevent injury to their health and their careers.

Spice represents a real and present danger to our service members. Navy Medicine is committed to resolving this growing concern by delivering sustained, coordinated, aligned and targeted messages to leadership and to the deck plates and I encourage all of our leaders to do the same. For this effort, we have developed a video public service announcement as well as high resolution posters, to be used throughout the Fleet for awareness and training, both available for download [here](#).

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